

“Pragmatic Epistemology and the Importance of Descriptive Representation”

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Our Canadian legislature and democratic governments around the world are haunted by the history of oppression, discrimination, and marginalization of minority groups that still suffer, politically and socially, the material effects of those injustices. Most of these governments have extended the franchise universally, and according to dominant liberal democratic theory, all citizens should have equal access to the political institutions that govern their lives by way of the principle of one-person-one-vote. Yet, the discrepancy between the proportion of members in a distinct (often marginalized) group within the population and the proportion of members of that group acting as representatives in parliament is empirically evident. It is argued that this absence is problematic, for symbolic as well as functional and moral reasons¹. This is a problem of political representation.

When I first submitted my proposal for this project, I was working on my undergraduate thesis. In that paper, I was defending a conception of descriptive representation on four grounds: symbolic value, its propensity to encourage deliberation, the improvement of the relationship between governing bodies and minority groups, and the insight or experiential knowledge that descriptive representatives offer. I had initially proposed using Richard Rorty’s pragmatic epistemology to elucidate exactly what it meant for experiential knowledge to change the outcome of political deliberation. But, as I was reading Rorty’s various works on pragmatism and cultural politics, I found that pragmatic epistemology offers us – us being

¹ For more in-depth discussions of these problems, see Grey (2002), Mansbridge (2000), Phillips (1995), Tremblay and Pelletier (2000), and Williams (1998).

people who see systemic oppression and marginalization and wish to ameliorate it – much more than simply an electoral strategy.

In this paper, I will explain Rorty's pragmatic view of truth and knowledge, and the consequences of that view for human society and moral progress. I will then argue that in light of these consequences, the legislature and the role of the political representative contain much more *transformational* power than we usually take it to possess, and that this has a great deal of potential for social change. I will then argue that this potential is best realized when two changes are implemented in our political and electoral systems: the first, an electoral system that facilitates increased descriptive representation of women and minority groups, and second, a commitment to good faith and open-minded deliberation on the part of representatives. I argue that these two changes yield three benefits: increased satisfaction of the interests of various groups in society, greater legitimacy of political institutions (and thus the decisions that they make), and political decisions that are ethical and empathetic to the experiences of all citizens.

The question of truth – what it is, if anything – has been debated since the ancients, but there is certainly a common-sense definition that most of us work with: accordance with fact or reality (New Oxford American Dictionary). That is, “the truth” is generally thought of as the actual state of affairs in the world, independent of human experience or belief; or, as Goodman calls it, the “way the world is” (Goodman). What we seek, then, when we inquire into scientific, political, or social problems, is a set of propositions, believed and justified, that describes what *actually is the case*. For example, when political scientists Tremblay and Pelletier set out to perform a study on what motivates political representatives more – their gender or their party

affiliation – they were seeking to gather data (justification) which supported a conclusion (belief) that accurately reflected how representatives behaved (truth) (Tremblay and Pelletier).

Rorty argues, in the American pragmatist tradition, that the quest for “truth” as defined above is ill conceived. He points out that when evaluating claims to knowledge – such as the conclusion reached by Tremblay and Pelletier – what earns one proposition the designation of “true” is not really any inherent characteristic, but rather the justificatory set of beliefs or experiences that accompany it. In other words, we do not evaluate knowledge claims by comparing them to the ‘truth’ because we don’t have a transcendental access to it. That is why we engage in inquiry in the first place! As Rorty says, “We cannot find a skyhook which lifts us out of mere coherence – mere agreement – to find something like “correspondence to reality as it is in itself”” (Rorty, *Science as Solidarity* 38). What we *do* do when we evaluate knowledge claims is look at the supporting body of evidence and debate on whether or not it is indeed sufficient to demonstrate the claim being made, and as a community of knowers, converge upon a particular belief. It is only then that we attribute truth value to it.

Rorty concludes that in light of this understanding of how knowledge claims are made, there may or may not be a “way the world is”, but the “difference [between justification and truth] makes no difference to my decisions about what to do” (Rorty, *Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?* 19). What we are doing when we are coming together as an epistemic community is not striving for objectivity, but rather for solidarity – convergence among that community as to what the correct interpretation of our sense experience is. He says,

... those who wish to reduce objectivity to solidarity – call them ‘pragmatists’ – do not require either a metaphysics or an epistemology. They view truth as, in William

James' phrase, what is good for *us* to believe. So they do not need an account of a relation between beliefs and objects called "correspondence," nor an account of human cognitive abilities which ensures that our species is capable of entering into that relation. (Rorty, *Solidarity or objectivity?* 22)

He wishes to dismiss altogether the question of whether or not something is true in the objectivist sense given above.

This conception of truth is a rather difficult one to accept, particularly when it calls into question the very foundation of our scientific and academic enterprise. Indeed, Rorty's support for this treatment of truth has led to accusations of relativism, and it is not hard to see why. Our scientific enterprise is predicated on this desire to know, objectively, what is the case, and when these knowledge claims are dependent on the community in which they are made, then it would seem that it is possible to have two contradictory knowledge claims being made, and accepted, in two different communities. We want to be able to say that one (likely our own community's) is *right*, that it reflects "the way the world is", and that the other is incorrect. We want to be able to say that we make these claims *because* they are true.

But this objection to Rorty is perhaps unfair. Rorty, too, wants to be able to say that the beliefs that we hold are preferable to the alternatives, that there are good reasons for accepting one claim over another. What he *is* doing, however, is *describing* the events that lead to the acceptance of knowledge claims. He merely says that since we lack this transcendental access to truth, we must necessarily rely on solidarity on one justificatory set. I think that it is important to stress that Rorty is not making a claim about the *existence* or *nature* of truth, but rather saying that the belief that there is such an independent state of affairs is not *useful* to us

– it is not the way that we, as human animals, work. Truth does not just appear to us, as some sort of divine revelation about the universe. As he says, “‘Truth’ is not the name of a power that eventually wins through; it is just the nominalization of an approbative adjective” (Rorty, *Feminism and Pragmatism* 226). The account that ‘wins out’ in the end is simply the one that has the justification that is convincing to the greatest number of people in the debate. Inquiry, then, is a *necessarily* social project, and insofar as we can describe what happens when a theory is either confirmed or disconfirmed, Rorty’s account seems to be accurate. So, Rorty is neither making an epistemological nor a metaphysical claim about the nature of truth, but is rather making an observation about the way we come to possess “knowledge” in human society.

Regardless of whether or not you accept Rorty’s account when applied specifically to scientific inquiry, his argument has some important and revealing consequences for moral and political actions. One of the most troubling consequences of Rorty’s conception of truth – as being what a community approbates – is that it seems to leave oppressed and marginalized groups vulnerable to the stipulations of the majority. If a group is able to justify unequal treatment of one group in a way that is acceptable to the majority, and if we lack access to universal moral truths, then we seem to be without the moral force to condemn such marginalization. For example, when women were excluded from the definition of “persons” in Canada in the 19th century, then for all intents and purposes, they in fact were not, on Rorty’s account. There is no “truth” that we can motion to; the exclusion of women did not violate any empirical or moral imperatives. Rorty himself seemed cognizant of this worry when he said that in accepting this pragmatist account, we “have to give up the comforting belief that competing

groups will always be able to reason together on the basis of plausible and neutral premises” (Rorty, *Human Rights* 206).

However, in *Feminism and Pragmatism*, Rorty argues that pragmatism and the pragmatic account of knowledge and truth, actually gives minority groups more ammunition to procure social change (212). In keeping with his view of ‘truth’ being what is agreed upon by communities, Rorty argues that moral truths, social practices, and personal identities are likewise socially dependent. Laws, practices, and hierarchies are created and maintained by the dominant social group. These values become embedded in the dominant language, and this language helps maintain this state of affairs (remember the example of Canadian women as non-persons. The dominant definition of ‘person’ excluded them, and helped maintain their oppression). But, the advantage offered by a pragmatist conception of truth, Rorty argues, is that we can change these states of affairs by imagining a future in which the conditions of society are such that they are no longer painful or disadvantageous for certain groups, and begin to speak about that future, creating the concepts and ideas that reflect the values of this future, and injecting those concepts and ideas into the language of the dominant group. These subordinate groups create justificatory arguments for change, based on their experiences of suffering.

In the past, individuals struggling for social change have done so on the basis of absolute moral truths – for example, women *are* persons, even if they haven’t been treated as such. But Rorty contends that what we are convinced by when we appeal to those absolute truths is not the existence of those truths themselves – they exert no force on us – but rather the accounts of hardship and oppression that those who utilize the truths seek to address. He argues that

political and moral action is not achieved by appeals to absolute moral truths, but rather by making “invidious comparisons between the actual present and a possible, if inchoate, future” (Rorty, *Feminism and Pragmatism* 217). This is particularly evident in his discussion of human rights, and what might be called moral progress in the last two hundred years. He says,

These two centuries are most easily understood not as a period of deepening our understanding of the nature of rationality or of morality, but rather as one in which there occurred an astonishingly rapid progress of sentiments, in which it has become much easier for us to be moved to action by sad and sentimental stories” (Rorty, *Human Rights* 185)

He does not use “sad and sentimental stories” in a pejorative sense, but in a particularly honest one. The stories of oppression, discrimination, even violence, committed against some groups by others are truly heartbreaking, and it is through this heartbreaking that members of the dominant group come to empathize with the marginalized, to see in them their own humanity, and to seek change. This is the power of social discourse, the language sharing of the majority and the minority, and the potential for imagined futures to be achieved, not because they are natural or inevitable, but because we want them to.

So, from Rorty, we have learned that what matters in knowledge attribution is not truth value, but justification, and knowledge claims gain their status by the solidarity of an epistemic community – by the convergence of agreement. Thus, knowledge is necessarily social, and produced not only scientifically, but linguistically. This reframing (and it is a reframing because the process of investigation is not itself changed, but only our understanding of it) of truth and knowledge impacts moral and political progress in that it prevents us from being able to say

that state of affairs x is better or more ideal than state of affairs y. We cannot characterize the social and political change we have undergone up until this point as moving towards the *way it should be* in an objective sense, but we can agree that state of affairs x is *better for us* than state of affairs y. Thus, moral and political progress is a social convention too, and this gives us a great deal of power and agency in that it allows us to change things that we find unsatisfactory by way of solidarity around a different state of affairs. In the case of ameliorating the oppression or disadvantage of one group at the hands of another, this is best achieved through the sharing of experiences, through sad and sentimental stories. When the subordinate group is able to share with the dominant the ways in which they are negatively impacted by the status quo, then the dominant group is able to identify with that suffering, and collectively, society can agree to pursue change. This is all achieved through imagination, communication, and empathy.

What does this mean for our political institutions? It means that what happens in the legislature is not merely procedural. It is not just a means of collective decision-making. It is actually a site where imagination, communication, empathy and consequently, social change is possible. The legislature is a potential site of *transformation*. However, while it has this potential, there remains the fact of disproportionate representation of dominant social groups, and the relative silencing of women and minorities (at least in our Canadian context). For us to truly tap into this transformational power, two systemic changes are needed.

First, social change is dependent on the sharing of stories and experiences. When a particular homogenous group dominates the legislature, those stories and experiences are limited or not available. Of course, women and minority groups might be represented

substantively, in that representatives who are not themselves members of those groups can relate on their behalf their needs, interests, and experiences. But representatives who are themselves members of those groups, who have themselves experienced marginalization or disadvantage, have a much more intimate understanding of what changes are needed, and what issues need to be privileged on the legislative agenda. They can speak with the authority of experience and insight, and they provide a more direct and comfortable line of communication between the electorate and the representative.

However, it is not enough simply to have those individuals present in sufficient numbers. What is also needed for descriptive representation to be effective is a commitment on the part of representatives to a thorough, open-minded and earnest deliberative process. Through this good faith deliberation, representatives should listen to the concerns and experiences every group, and balance the needs and interests of their own constituency with the needs of others. This results in a diversity of representatives who work together, despite disagreement – or, indeed, in the spirit of disagreement – to hear the priorities of other social groups, ensuring the procedural equality of their constituents with an ear open to the effects of certain political actions on particular groups of people.

I recognize that these suggestions are vague and perhaps idealistic. Unfortunately, I do not have the time here to work through a political science of how such changes could be enacted. But I do think that we can see three major benefits resulting from a move in this direction. The first is the satisfaction of the interests of a greater proportion of the population. As it stands, unequal representation of social groups leaves their interests and preferences out of current political deliberations. While they are there to a small extent in the form of lobby

groups and substantive representation, perhaps even through what Jane Mansbridge calls “surrogate” representation (Mansbridge, Rethinking Representation), their physical absence means that they are not able to share their personal experiences, unable to appeal to the sentiment of other representatives, and left out of the considerations of new policy implementation. Greater representation would guarantee that their interests are considered equally, and increase the likelihood that they are satisfied.

Secondly, descriptive representation increases the legitimacy of the political procedure that yields collective decisions. One of the foundational principles of democracy is the equality of all citizens, and equal opportunity to affect the decisions that are made in the legislature (Christiano 3). It ensures that equality is not just met in principle, but that certain systemic biases are compensated for. I thank Angie White for raising this point.

Lastly, and I think most importantly, it makes the legislature a site for moral action. Again, returning to Rorty, we understand that moral progress is not simply an emergence of the ‘right’ state of affairs, but actually the product of social deliberation on the right thing to do. The presence of a diversity of people able to give first hand accounts of the injustice of their experience is an opportunity for that deliberation, and opportunity for the marginalized to share their imagined future, and to affect the dominant language of oppression.

In a way, it perhaps looks like I am arguing for political change that is somewhat easy to agree with, at least in principle and aim, and justifying it on the basis of a much more controversial set of claims. However, I think that there is something importantly right about Rorty’s conception of truth and human progress that sheds light *at least* on our political and moral processes. While we are less inclined to think of politics as a matter of “truth” and

“objectivity” and more as a matter of interests and needs, there are perhaps residual effects of our society’s privileging of scientific, objective truths on which we base a number of our decisions and actions – a ‘public hankering’ for truths that demonstrate that a certain group’s way is the *right way* and this sort of stubborn commitment gets in the way of open-minded deliberation (Rorty, *Science as Solidarity* 37). The value of Rorty’s project, I think, lies in his emphasis of the social nature of knowledge, and the ability for human beings to create social change by affecting the dominant language and paradigm. Its strength is its recognition that what creates the impetus for social change and the amelioration of the suffering of some individuals is the sharing of those stories of experience and the feeling of empathy by one group for another. It gives us a powerful agency, and makes our political institutions capable of evolution and response.

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